

October 2019

Speech and Language Special

Children's Centre Leader

POLICY

Just how many children are benefitting from children's centres in England?

Imran Hussain, Director of Policy and Campaigns, reflects on Action for Children's new research that shows falling numbers of children using children's centres across England and the need for a new childhood strategy.

Action for Children, like many readers of Children's Centre Leader, understands how vital it is that every child gets the best start in life. Yet, children's centres – one of the most important routes to supporting families – have faced a series of challenges in recent years.

Readers will be familiar with many of the worrying statistics. A 62 per cent fall in local authority spending since 2010 and more than 1,000 closures since 2009 according to the Sutton Trust. These reflect a trend of disinvestment as local authority budgets are squeezed by central government cuts.

Action for Children wanted to add a new dimension to the evidence base to better understand how changes in service provision are impacting on capacity within centres. We set out to collect information on the number of children using centres across England in the last few years.

Children's centres have long held records of the number of children they are supporting. In 2014, the National Evaluation of Children's Centres found 97 per cent of local authorities used a uniform system to collect and analyse children's centre data. Even with the loss of many data administrators

(continued on p2)



INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Cover: BENEFITS FOR CHILDREN
4 HUNGRY LITTLE MINDS
6 PATHWAYS TO TALKING
9 LITERACY AND LANGUAGE
13 SYSTEM TO IMPROVE SPEECH
18 CLOSING THE WORD GAP
20 LANGUAGE FOR LIFE

Welcome

Welcome to the October 2019 issue of Children's Centre Leader.

In this issue, reminding us of how valuable children's centres are to children Imran Hussain looks at exactly how many children are benefitting. Then, we showcase a range of projects, strategies and systems to improve speech, language and communication outcomes for children: Department for Education - Hungry Little Minds; Greater Manchester - GM Pathways to Talking; Linking language and literacy - Elklan; The Balanced System - Marie Gascoigne; Language for Life - Nottinghamshire; and joint working in Department for Education and Public Health England.

As always, let us know what you think by emailing: cclr@hempalls.com

James Hempalls, OBE
Editor,
Children's Centre
Leader



(continued from p1)

in children's centres, we were confident we would be able to get a good response from local authorities.

We sent out our Freedom of Information request and found 139 out of 152 councils (91 per cent) still operated a database. Of these, 121 were able to provide full data on children's centre use between 2014/15 and 2017/18.

As not all local authorities were able to provide data we used the results to produce a conservative estimate for a national usage figure. We found that between 2014/15 and 2017/18, the number of children using children's centres fell by almost 400,000 – from 2.2 million to 1.8 million. This is a fall of almost a fifth (18 per cent) in just four years.

The proportion of all children aged under five who have used a children's centre fell from 50 per cent to 41 per cent between 2014/15 and 2017/18. Once a universal service for all children, children's centre use across the population has fallen by nine percentage points in the last few years. As centres become more targeted and work with those children with the greatest need, they are gradually reaching a smaller percentage of the total population.

With a growing debate about the role of centres in supporting school aged children, we also asked for an age breakdown for centre users. We found the majority of children using children's

centres are in their pre-school years. We estimate that, in 2017/18, 1.7 million children aged five and under used children's centres compared to just 166,000 aged six and over.

While a fall in use may reflect changing levels of need among children, there is little evidence to suggest this is the case. Such a pattern of decreasing need would be reflected by centres working with fewer families, presenting with less complex challenges.

However, a survey of Action for Children's centres found the opposite to be true. Two-thirds (62 per cent) reported working with families who have more complex needs. The same proportion also reported that the time spent working with each child had increased. The more complex problems families face often require more intensive support. Together, this suggests that – far from seeing a decrease in need – children's centres are increasingly working with families that have more challenging problems.

With the data from our request we were also able to look at how usage had changed in different communities. We found that amongst the most deprived local authorities there has been a 22 per cent fall in the number of children using children's centres – from 324,327 to 253,370. In comparison, the least deprived local authorities have seen a fall of 12 per cent in the number of children using children's centres – from 334,494 to 292,870.

Even in the most affluent

local authorities, children will still need help. But we know that the most deprived local authorities have poorer outcomes for children than the least deprived. Indeed, helping children in deprived communities was a key driver behind the creation of children's centres in the beginning.

With little evidence in recent years of big improvements in outcomes for children in deprived areas – from school readiness to health – the fall in numbers of children receiving help from centres is deeply concerning. It raises questions about whether centres have the capacity to reach out to those who might need them the most.

Looking at the usage in different areas naturally raises the question about whether there is a link with improved outcomes. Though this is a difficult one to answer as we know there are a lot of factors which influence outcomes, we wanted to explore any link in more depth. Much will also depend on which particular measure is used.

As children's centres play a big role in improving outcomes for children by age five and closing the gap between those from low income families and their peers, we looked at usage compared to results from the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP).

We found that in local authorities where the number of children using centres in the last four years has increased, the gap between low income children and their peers reaching a good level of

development (GLD) has closed, on average, by 0.5 percentage points (pp). In comparison, those local authorities that have seen a fall in use have, on average, seen the gap increase by 0.3pp. Whilst small, these figures should be seen in the context of slow progress nationally. In the last five years the gap has only closed 1.7pp.

Among individual local authorities, there was significant variation between use and outcomes at age five. Without accounting for other factors, it is difficult to determine the specific value of children's centres in achieving a GLD. However, our analysis provides a starting point for further research. And with many local authorities recording usage data – and outcomes data widely available – there is potential for exploring how children's centres are making a difference to children's outcomes.

For those of us involved with the development and delivery of children's centres over many years these findings aren't surprising. We see the

difference programmes and dedicated staff make every day. We have all seen the impact of funding reductions and centres closing. We know the effect this can have on local communities.

And we haven't been silent in raising concerns. Action for Children and many others have been taking these points directly to politicians. With a new Prime Minister and a new Secretary of State we now need the government to take the lead.

Action for Children's 'Choose Childhood' campaign polled families and found two in five parents and grandparents do not believe children today do not have a brighter future than previous generations. We believe this has to change and a new UK childhood strategy is needed to align government action.

The starting point for a new strategy must be giving all children the best start in life – with children's centres being the cornerstone for how this can be delivered.



Action for Children's vision is for every child to have a safe and happy childhood and the foundations they need to thrive. It runs over 100 children's centres. Imran has led the charity's work to secure a clear government vision for children's centres and greater funding for early years services.

Hungry Little Minds

Department for Education officially launched their new three-year campaign to support speech, language and communication skills in disadvantaged families.

We know that the early years are crucial for a child's development, and what happens at home plays a vital role. Improving early communication, language and literacy development is a key priority for the government and a cornerstone of a country that works for everyone.

We have based this campaign on the wide evidence base that shows that the some of the poorest children in the UK start school months behind their peers and the gap can grow through their school years. Children with poor vocabulary skills at age five may be up to twice as likely to be unemployed in their 30s. This 'word gap' has a profound impact on children's educational, social, mental health and employment outcomes.

In July 2018, the Department for Education announced an ambition to halve the proportion of children who finish their reception year without the early communication, language and literacy skills they need to thrive.

This is why the Department for Education has officially launched "[Hungry Little Minds](#)" – a new three-year campaign to encourage parents to engage in activities

that support their child's early learning and help set them up for school and beyond. Hungry Little Minds will reach parents and carers of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, helping them to support their child's communication, language and literacy development.

The Hungry Little Minds campaign will encourage parents to engage in activities that support early learning in the home or nudge their behaviour towards doing so.

We want to create a big social movement for change, and we are keen to work with local authorities, children's centres and early years practitioners, as well as public and voluntary organisations, who can play a crucial role in getting the word out to parents. Your support and work on the ground is absolutely vital to getting the campaign message across to the most disadvantaged families.

The launch week was very successful, with over 700 mentions of Hungry Little Minds from a wide variety of organisations, potentially reaching over 3.5 million Twitter users. We also had a wide variety of media coverage, including Sky News, BBC regions, the Star and the Daily Mail covering

the launch. We had 37,874 visits to the website to date (as at 1 August). We are hugely grateful to everyone who showed their support, and it's great to see so many local authorities and local organisations such as libraries embedding 'Hungry Little Minds' in their social media activity.

We know, however, that a campaign is not the "silver bullet" to closing the word gap. We are making a number of investments in the early years, including a £6.5m investment in VCS grants supporting the home learning environment and children with SEND.

These projects are as follows:

- » **National Literacy Trust** have launched a new "[Small Talk](#)" website and are running Small Talk events for parents to promote the importance of communicating with their children, as well as working with businesses to share these messages.
- » **I CAN** are working with local communities to engage disadvantaged parents using the EasyPeasy app.
- » **Institute of Wellbeing** are taking a culturally tailored, community-led approach to improve the HLE for disadvantaged BME parents.
- » **Scouts** are piloting a new programme

called "Hedgehogs" in partnership with Action for Children.

- » **Early Years Alliance's** project is working with early years staff to improve their skills in identifying Speech, Language and Communication (SLC) needs, taking appropriate action to support SLC development and supporting parents to develop their own children's SLC.
- » **Coram Family and Childcare's** programme aims to increase take up of free early education offers for two, three and four year olds and EYPP, especially focusing on reaching the most disadvantaged families.
- » **PACEY's** Together for Twos (TfT) focus is on increasing parental awareness of the 2-year-old offer and promotion of childminding as either a childcare or career choice. Activities also include working in partnership with Job Centre Plus and Health to provide information to parents.

Our programmes on SEND are:

- » **National Children's Bureau** aim to improve the quality and confidence of early years settings to better support and identify children with SEND. The



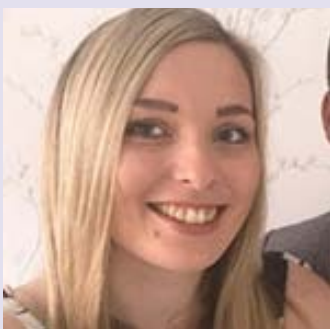
programme also helps local authorities to involve all professionals in a child's life to support.

- » **Nasen's** project will see 507 early years staff trained as an Early Years Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators in 23 local authority areas. The training will help early years staff to identify and support children with Special Educational Needs.

Hungry Little Minds builds on the Government's wider

[early years social mobility programme](#), which is backed with over £100 million pounds of investment.

If you are interested in finding out more, or you would like to be involved, please get in touch with us at hle.coalition@education.gov.uk.



Connie Barrett started her Civil Service career as a Fast Track Apprentice in 2014. She has worked in a variety of policy roles including Civil Service reform, diversity and inclusion in the Civil Service and the free early education entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds. For the past year Connie has led on home learning environment policy in the early years.

GM Pathways to Talking

Becky Bibby and **Jan Robinson** from Greater Manchester share details of their GM Pathways to Talking project, which attracted Early Outcomes Funding and the support of academic research partners from Manchester Metropolitan University.

When the Government announced in November 2018 that it was inviting applications for the Early Outcomes Fund, Greater Manchester saw an opportunity to further embed and evaluate its existing Early Years Communication and Language Pathway which has been developed to improve the speech, language and communication skills of 221,522 0-5 year olds across the region.

The Early Outcomes Fund builds on the Government's ambition in 'Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential: a plan for improving social mobility through education' published in December 2017, which set out plans to close the word gap in the early years.

Greater Manchester (GM) is made up of the ten Greater Manchester localities including Bolton, Bury, Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, Salford, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford and Wigan, working in partnership with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. One of the strategic priorities of Greater Manchester's Mayor, Andy Burnham, is to help drive the GM ambition to increase the number of children starting school ready to learn. While there has been significant progress to improve school readiness

in recent years GM is now aiming to close the gap with – and then overtake – England on the percentage of children achieving a Good Level of Development at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage.

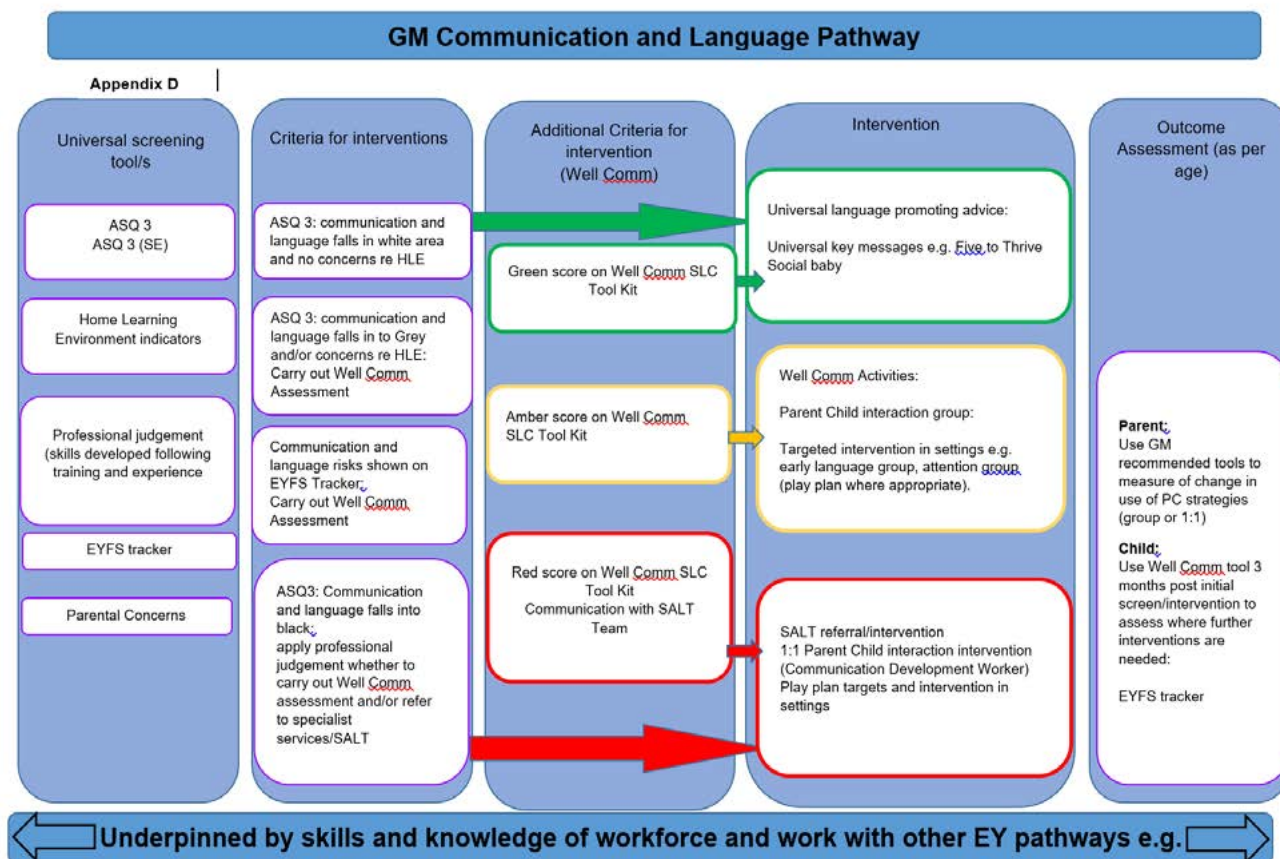
School readiness is a key focus across GM, with an Early Years Delivery Model and eight stage assessment model in place across all the 10 localities. The Early Years Delivery Model includes a number of evidence-based assessment tools and interventions delivered for children from birth to five through consistent pathways across Greater Manchester, including a multi-agency Communication and Language Pathway which is led by Michelle Morris, Consultant Speech and Language Therapist with Salford Royal Foundation Trust and the GM Speech and Language Therapy Lead. With most areas implementing the pathway since 2014, the focus for the GM bid was to evaluate the stage and impact of implementation across all 10 areas and to identify and understand some of the enablers and barriers to implementation.

We were delighted to receive the news in January 2019 that GM had been successful and awarded £1.5m to evaluate and increase the scale and

pace of implementation of the Communication and Language Pathway, across Greater Manchester. We are one of eight areas receiving EOF funding and as a combined authority bid, we needed to identify one of the GM local authorities to be the lead local authority to submit and coordinate the GM bid and Salford City Council is providing this lead role. We decided to call our project GM Pathways to Talking.

Through writing the bid, early years leads from across Greater Manchester worked together to identify the priorities for the project and a common theme that arose was the need for some external evaluation of the Communication and Language pathway implementation. We are very good in GM at developing and implementing new ways of working, but collectively identified that we needed an increased focus on evaluation. We also recognised the need to work with colleagues experienced in research and evaluation and invited Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) to be a strategic partner in the GM bid.

So having been awarded the funding for 12 months from April 2019, we quickly needed to get started. We



identified two immediate priorities: establishing effective project governance to ensure that all 10 localities are represented and engaged in project development and alignment with the wider decision making structures for the GM Readiness programme; and to agree our evaluation objectives.

We invited all 10 areas to identify and nominate a GM Pathways to Talking project lead to drive this work at a locality level and to form a GM wider project team. We used some of the funding to enable localities to provide some increased capacity for project management and very quickly found we had a team of project leads in place. The enthusiasm at locality level was evident and we held our project launch

event with early years leads and speech and language leads from across GM just a month after receiving our grant notification letter from the DfE.

We worked closely with two senior colleagues from MMU, Professor Deborah James and Dr Julie Marshall to identify our evaluation objectives:

1. To understand the leadership attributes associated with systems change in delivery of the speech, language and communication pathway;
2. To understand how the Communication and Language Pathway is implemented (social processes) within the 10 localities;
3. To understand the process of distributed ownership of the

communication and language pathway with communities, families and the workforce;

4. To understand the pathway in terms of its use, its impact and its reach on the ground.

So where are we up to now? We have developed a locality stocktake self-evaluation document which all localities have completed; and during July and early August, we visited each locality to discuss their Communication and Language Pathway baseline position which includes identifying local successes, challenges and implementation priorities. One of the evidenced-based tools we are using in GM is the WellComm Language Toolkit and we are keen to find out how this is being used and

(continued on p8)

(continued from p7)

how the assessment data is being collected and used. We can already see some common themes arising.

We met in August with the GM Pathways to Talking wider project team to share implementation priorities and develop a Theory of Change model for each locality. Following this, each area is developing their own implementation plan and EOF funding will be allocated at a locality level. Whilst localities will have their own priorities, we are keen to align where possible and will be developing peer networks to help ensure long-term sustainability and provide a legacy from the GM Early

Outcomes Fund project. The evaluation activity will run alongside this, with a deep dive into two of the localities and a broader evaluation for all 10 localities.

We are also planning some leadership coaching for the locality leads; some speech, language and communication and WellComm training and development sessions for multi-agency colleagues across GM and working with colleagues from the GM Research Team and GM Digital Team, to explore how we can improve the collection and use of data to evidence the impact of the Communication and Language Pathway.

GM is also in the process of establishing an Early Years Workforce Academy,

an innovative regional approach to enhancing the practice, knowledge and skills of the diverse range of professionals working in early years services. Learning from the EOF project will inform this work and the core development programme offered by the Academy. Watch this space....

These are exciting times for us in Greater Manchester and the Early Outcomes Fund is providing some of the additional investment we need to evaluate our current Communication and language Pathway and to increase the pace and scale of its implementation. If you would like to follow the project as it progresses, please visit <https://GMPathwaystoTalking.blog>



Becky Bibby is Assistant Director for Early Help and School Readiness in Salford City Council. Becky joined Salford in 2009 as their Childcare Strategy Manager with responsibility for managing the Children's Centres and Quality Assurance Team and now manages Early Years and Early Help services which have been recently redesigned to increase the focus on School Readiness. Becky is the strategic lead for the Greater Manchester EOF project and is passionate about improving children's speech and language and is committed to working collaboratively with the GM Combined Authority where she has been involved in the development of the GM Early Years Delivery Model since its beginning in 2009. Becky can be contacted at GMPathwaystoTalking@salford.gov.uk



Jan Robinson recently retired from her role as Early Years Strategic Lead in Bolton Council and now working as an independent Early Years Consultant and supporting the GM EOF project as the GM Pathways to Talking Programme Manager. Jan started her career as an early years teacher and has been a Headteacher and Early Years Adviser in St Helens and Lancashire and led an Early Excellence Centre within a large Primary School in St. Helens. Jan has a particular interest in early years leadership and the development of integrated services, and also in the key role of Communication and Language development in the early years. Jan has also been involved in the development of the GM Early Years Delivery Model since 2009. Jan is the author of the blog: <https://GMPathwaystoTalking.blog> and can be contacted at GMPathwaystoTalking@salford.gov.uk

The link between literacy and language in early years: A practical guide

Liz Elks, director of Elklan Training offers plenty of practical tips for linking literacy and language in the early years.

The path to developing essential literacy skills is rooted in early years experiences and education. Having well developed oral language is essential if children are going to develop age appropriate literacy skills.

To ensure high achievement in literacy in later years there must be a focus on developing oral language skills in early years settings.

Speech and language development for young children

'It is a recognised fact,' says Liz Elks from Elkan, 'that the first three years of life are the most critical period for children in developing speech and language skills. For good developmental progress, children up to the age of three need to be surrounded with a language rich environment and adults who interact and talk with them appropriately in order to acquire these skills.'

Language and speech are different

Language refers to the words we use and how we

put them together so that others can understand what we are trying to convey.

Language includes:

Receptive language

Understanding the meaning of words and sentences, including the implied meaning such as what 'pull your socks up' means, as well as remembering what we have heard,

Expressive language

Choosing the right words and being able to put those words into grammatically correct sentence ('I am putting on my shoe', rather than 'shoe am putting on').

Social use of language

Communicating what we wish to say in the right tone of voice, in an appropriate manner and using suitable non-verbal communication.

Speech refers to production of the sounds. This includes:

Articulation, or how to make the sounds in the words using clear diction so that e.g. a 'k' doesn't come out as a 't'.

Fluency, or talking

without stammering.

Developing receptive language

In typical development, children develop receptive language skills before they speak. By 18 months a toddler may say 30-50 single words but will understand many more including phrases and simple instructions. Therefore, it is vital to surround them with appropriate language from birth and keep interacting and chatting with them even though they may not be saying much back.

Helping children to understand spoken language

1. Gain the child's attention before speaking

Call the child by name 'Louis...'

2. Be aware of the complexity of the language you use with the child

The language used can be complex in terms of the length of the sentence, the

(continued on p10)



structure (grammar) or the vocabulary used. If a child does not understand, try to reflect on the language used and consider simplifying the length, structure and/or vocabulary.

3. Pause between sentences to allow children to process the information

4. Order your sentences. For example, 'Put your painting on the rack and then go outside' is much less complicated than 'Before you go outside put your painting on the rack'.

5. Consider the language used when asking children not to do something

The ability to understand the language 'not' as in 'do not run' or 'you can't go outside today' usually develops around 16 months. However, some children, with speech, language and communication needs, do not understand

the meaning of negatives. Instead, turn the statement into a positive one, 'Walk please' or 'It's raining outside.'

6. Use a multi-sensory approach i.e. pictures, objects and real life experiences to reinforce verbal information

7. Encourage the child to tell you when they do not understand

8. Use appropriate non-verbal communication and sometimes emphasise key words by using slight stress

Language development and literacy

Speech, language and literacy are closely linked, meaning that children are likely to have trouble with the latter if they have difficulty with the former. To develop literacy children need to be able to understand and use oral language, because many of the key

skills we use for reading and writing are speech and language skills, specifically:

Vocabulary. We need to be able to understand a vast range of words; this starts with hearing a word used in context, which helps us know what it means.

Being able to pay attention. Listening skills are more than just being able to hear words. You also need to be able to pay attention and concentrate to understand what is being said.

Understanding sentences, this involves processing longer strings of words, as well as more complex elements such as tenses and plurals.

Having ideas, sequencing them together and forming them into grammatically correct sentences.

These skills need to be present



for literacy skills to emerge, and need to be developed during a child's early years.

Speech development and literacy

Literature suggests a link between the development of speech, phonological awareness and literacy skills (Stackhouse and Wells 1997, Bird and Bishop 1992).

The basis of speech development and literacy is phonological awareness. This involves:

An awareness of rhythms, patterns and sounds.

An understanding that rhythms, patterns and sounds are the building blocks of words.

The ability to break-up words into their constituent parts.

The ability to understand and talk about the

structure of words.

Very young children can respond to the rhythm and intonation in a familiar song and respond to the sounds from their home language more quickly than other languages. They do this subconsciously. They then gradually learn that words have meanings and they store the word as a whole unit.

With maturity, children begin to develop awareness of the structure of words – this is phonological awareness - that the word is made up of syllables, and then individual different sounds. These skills involve a speech processing system. Research suggests if a child has difficulties with the speech processing system, they are likely to have delayed speech and may, if their speech remains unclear at 5½ years old, experience further difficulties

with reading and spelling (Bird and Freeman 1995).

Phonological awareness develops gradually with rapid progress between the ages of 3-5 years. This means early years settings have a crucial role in promoting phonological awareness skills. Time should be spent exploring and enjoying the early skills of rhythm and rhyme in settings and at home, before focusing solely on sounds and letters, and activities should be carefully differentiated to meet the needs of individual children.

Activities to support phonological awareness in 2-3 years

Ideas for listening to rhythm and patterns

- » Use repeating line books and encourage joining in
- » Play with noise makers and instruments and follow the

- » children lead by copying the beats
- » Use songs and rhymes that use lots of actions
- » Sing songs to signal changes in routine e.g. story-time/greetings.
- » Play with puppets and animals, making the noises.
- » Make noises linked to interests, e.g. animals = animal noises, transport = aeroplane and motorbike noises etc.

Ideas for listening to sounds

- » Play with cause and effect toys that make noises and take turns.
- » Go outside and listen to the noises.
- » Listen out and refer to everyday sounds e.g. microwave pings.
- » Have noise makers in an area inside and outside e.g. filled bottles/pipes on the fences to bang.
- » Sound bags with interesting everyday noise makers e.g. phones, aliens, bells, shakers.

Linking to literacy

- » Use lots of printed photo material with words added to label toys/areas.



Liz Elks
 Director Elklan training
www.elklan.co.uk
liz@elklan.co.uk
 01208 841450

Material taken from Elklan Early Language Builders, Elks, L & McLchlan H 2016

The whole system is greater than the sum of its parts

Marie Gascoigne introduces her system for improving outcomes for speech, language and communication.

Improving the speech, language and communication of children and young people, as well as addressing the needs of those who struggle to develop these core skills for life, has been the focus of national and local initiatives for approaching two decades. The Bercow Review (2008)¹ resulted in the Better Communication Action Plan² which included the development of commissioning tools, a series of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) commissioning pathfinders projects as well as the Better Communication Research Programme³. Talking About A Generation (2017)⁴ brought together the data and evidence base linking the impact of social disadvantage on early speech, language and communication development and the subsequent impact on life chances; the under-estimation and under-identification of speech, language and communication need; the impact on attainment across the education system and beyond

into the workplace. Bercow: Ten Years On (2018)⁵ reviewed the progress since the initial review concluding that whilst there had been many examples of excellent practice and progress, the fundamental issues of joint commissioning, the 'post-code lottery' of variation in provision and outcomes and the need for whole systems change remain barriers to progress.

Despite this rather depressing introduction, the identification of 12 Opportunity Areas in 2017 and the DfE Early Years Social Mobility Programme in 2018, with early speech, language and communication development as a priority, bring with them a renewed opportunity to implement 'whole system' change that will bring closer the stated goal of "reducing the number of children by half who do not achieve the expected levels across all goals in the 'communication and language' and 'literacy' areas of learning by the end of Reception year"⁶.

So, in practice, there are some key challenges and

questions to be addressed:

- » **What** does 'whole system change' look like and how can it be achieved?
- » What interim functional outcomes for each part of that whole system can be identified that ensure the direction of travel towards the ultimate outcome of improved population level achievement of expected levels? **How?**
- » How to ensure that that the measures are measures of impact and not merely of inputs or outputs? **So what and prove it!**

Clearly if these were simple questions they would have been answered by now. However, in the Leicester City, Nottingham City and Derby City joint Early Outcomes Fund project the Balanced System® framework and tools are being used at a strategic level to better understand need, map and evaluate the system from commissioning through to provision, triangulate the predicted need with the planned response and use this to inform city wide

(continued on p14)

Figure 1: Balanced System® Model



tools and processes that support the methodology have also evolved to the current online platform.

The framework builds from the bottom with the premise that jointly commissioned outcomes for children, young people and families should be the basis of the whole system. The remaining core building blocks are an integrated workforce to deliver the outcomes working with parents, carers and young people.

Next comes the service delivery system, which includes strong leadership and management on which the success of the system is reliant, a platform of training and development and then the wider workforce and specialist workforce contributing equally but in different ways to the delivery of a universal, targeted and specialist offer.

The Five Strands provide the outcome areas which underpin the Balanced System® outcome framework.

[Click here](#) for an overview of the high-level outcome descriptors across each of the Five Strands and three levels⁷. This framework has been included in the forthcoming Public Health England guidance to support commissioners and local leaders around speech, language and communication⁸.

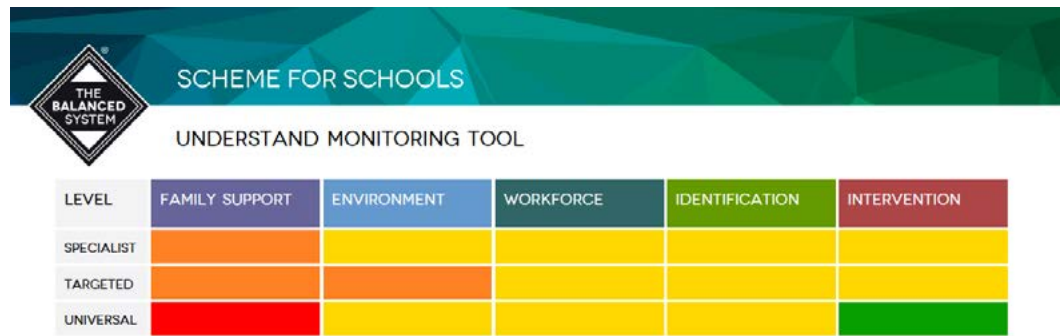
pathways for speech, language and communication. Alongside this project, Derby City is an Opportunity Area and as part of the TALK Derby initiative, the Balanced System® Schools, Settings and Childminders is being offered to facilitate understanding of need and generate action plans for change with a clear evidence

framework in all schools, children's centres, early years settings and childminders within eight priority wards.

What might a whole system model look like?

The Balanced System® has developed organically since 2003. The current iteration is summarised in Figure 1 (Above). The

Figure 2: Example of a school level end of understand phase summary



How to focus change on the whole system outcomes?

The methodology that has been developed with the system is a familiar understand, plan, do, review cycle. The proposal is that if meaningful impact measures for the outcomes in all Five Strands and at the three levels are being demonstrated then the whole system takes on a momentum that individual pockets of excellence struggle to achieve on their own.

Understand

Whether at a city-wide level or within a specific provision, the starting point is understanding the population size, demographic, predicted speech, language and communication need, as well as the current resource in terms of workforce number, skills and experience, as well as the demand on the workforce from numbers of families requiring targeted or specialist support. This quantitative data gives a sense

of the levels and patterns of need and the workforce in place to support the system.

The next part is to capture the current offer for children and families and map the offer within the Five Strand and three level framework with a specific element that asks the predicted impact is of each provision that is described. For example, it isn't enough to say that a member of the workforce has received training about promoting early language, the framework also asks that the intended outcome, the change as a consequence, for example how these skills will be used and the anticipated impact for children.

The summary of the understand phase can then be used to support planning whether at a strategic level in terms of a pathway or commissioning specification or within a provision in terms of identifying where there are gaps in the current provision

that suggest a training need, or a need to adapt the environment to encourage SLC development or a need to include a specific intervention as part of the daily routine.

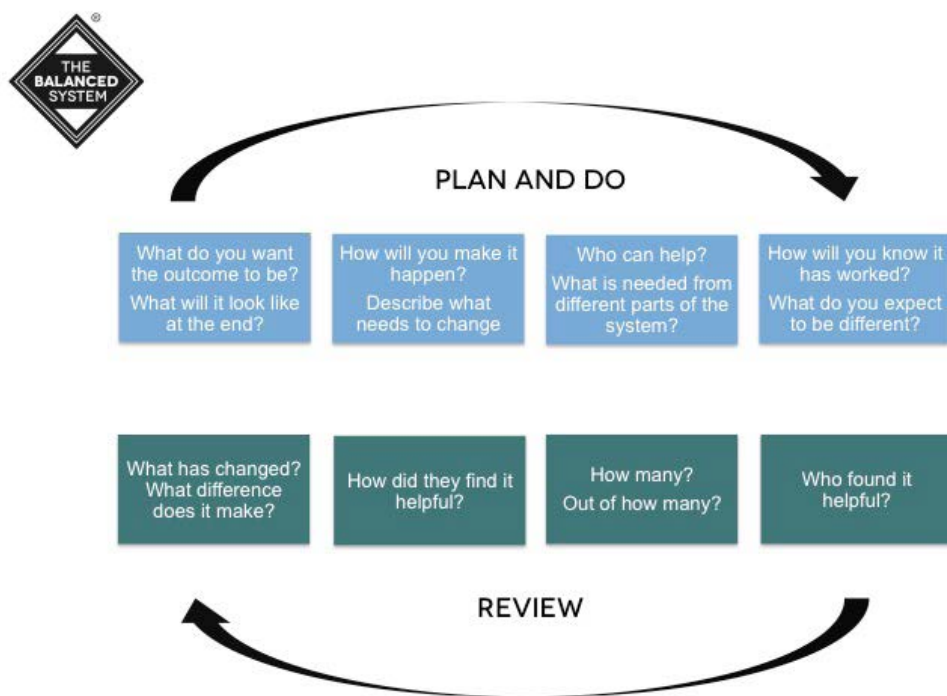
Plan, Do & Review

The response to the understand phase is where the potential exists to really move towards outcome focused planning with measurement of what success and impact will look like brought into the forefront of planning.

The Action Plan starts with the intended outcome in whichever strand and level is being prioritised. For example, from Figure 2 the Family Support strand appears relatively weak. So an outcome for universal family support might be chosen. This is where there is the potential to connect effort at the level of an individual school or provision with strategic planning at a local area level. At a Local Area

(continued on p16)

Figure 3: Balanced Systems® Plan, Do and Review Prompt



© BETTER COMMUNICATION CIC. 2019

level the outcome might be parents and carers are confident in supporting their child's communication development. At a school, setting or childminder level, this outcome statement will still be relevant but the actions will be tailored appropriately in a more focused way to the particular community or set of families.

The final piece of the puzzle is the levels of measure of 'outcome'. The Balanced System® uses an evidence framework that is adapted from the Friedman Results Based Accountability methodology. This describes four levels of evidence:

Level 1: Input; Level 2: Reach; Level 3: Quality; Level 4: Functional Impact.

The ambition is to move away from the reliance on measures of input towards measures of functional impact in the system. And yet, so many Key Performance Indicators are about counting 'did we do it?' not 'did it make a difference?.'

Figure 3 shows how at the planning stage it is crucial to consider the impact measures that will inform whether the functional outcome has been achieved. Is the whole system greater than the sum of the parts?

The concurrent work with both the Early Outcomes Fund and TALK Derby Opportunity Area provides a unique opportunity. The combination of being able to use the process across the system, starting with individual practitioners, settings and

schools and the families they work with, whilst also working with area wide strategic partners, will allow a thorough exploration of whole system change. The key outcome, however, is that the process allows for the development of an outcomes focused culture where seeking impact evidence is at the forefront of everyone's mind when commissioning, planning and delivering support for children and young people and their families. Some participants have summed this up as 'changing **how we think** about what we do more than changing **what** we do'. Sustainability and longer-term outcomes for children come not from a project but from the people within a system.

References

¹ Department for Children, Schools and Families, DCSF Publications (2008), **The Bercow Report: A Review of Services for Children and Young People (0-19) with Speech, Language and Communication Needs** <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8405/7/7771-dcsf-bercow_Redacted.pdf>

² Department of Health (2008), **Better Communication: An action plan to improve services for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs** <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120106174535/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/Better_Communication.pdf>

³ Better Communication Research Programme: <<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/better-communication-research-programme>>

⁴ Marie Gascoigne and Jean Gross, The Communication Trust, **Talking About A Generation: Current Policy, Evidence and Practice for Speech, Language and Communication**, <https://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/media/540327/tct_talkingaboutgeneration_report_online.pdf>

⁵ ICAN and Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, **Bercow: Ten Years On: An independent review of provision for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs in England** (2018) <<https://www.bercow10yearson.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/337644-ICAN-Bercow-Report-WEB.pdf>>

⁶ Department for Education, **DfE Update: Early Years Social Mobility Programme** (July 2019) <<https://foundationyears.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/DfE-Social-Mobility-Programme-slides.pdf>>

⁷ **The Balanced System High Level Outcomes for Speech, Language and Communication Needs** <https://www.thebalancedsystem.org/BC_HighLevelOutcomes_v1.pdf>

⁸ Public Health England (2020) forthcoming "Speech, Language and Communication Pathway for Children under 5 years. Guidance to support local commissioners and service leads"



Marie Gascoigne is Director and Founder of Better Communication CIC, a not-for-profit organisation established to support the commissioning and design of services to support children and young people's speech, language and communication through the Balanced System®.

Marie is qualified as a speech and language therapist and in a career spanning 30 years, has worked as a practitioner, academic, researcher and author, returning to the NHS as a strategic lead to implement a service transformation based on the Balanced System®. Marie has represented the sector at a policy level for over 20 years including subject expert support to a number of DfE funded projects.

Closing the Word Gap

Public Health England and **Department for Education** work together to meet the national ambition for speech, language and communication.

The early years is a critical period for laying the foundations of good health and wellbeing which will ensure the child reaches their potential. Socially disadvantaged children are more likely to have speech and language difficulties than their peers, this has implications for their educational attainment and future life chances¹. Evidence suggests early language impacts significantly on child development including the ability to manage emotions and communicate feelings, establishing and maintaining relationships, to think symbolically and also importantly to learn to read and write.²

The Bercow report ten years on² suggests 1.4 million children and young people in the UK have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). In addition, children with poor vocabulary skills at age 5 are twice as likely to be unemployed when they reach adulthood and 60% of young offenders have low language skills³. SLCN is the most common special educational need in England, however it is one need often not identified early enough. Figure 1 demonstrates the extent and complexity of SLCN in children, together with the support required.

There is wide variability in children's language ability and rate of language development² particularly within the pre-school years. Those working with children and families need to be able recognise signs of language delay, to understand differing levels of need and to have clarity of the support systems available locally to ensure early, appropriate support.

Evidence also tells us that what happens at home plays a vital role in a child's development. The government has set an ambition to halve the proportion of children who finish their reception year without the early communication, language and literacy skills they need to thrive by 2028.

This is why the Department for Education has launched Hungry Little Minds – a new three-year campaign to encourage parents to engage in activities that support their child's early learning and help set them up for school and beyond. With the help of our trusted partners, including early years practitioners and health visitors, the Hungry Little Minds campaign will encourage parents to engage in activities that support early learning in the home or nudge their behaviour towards doing so.

To underpin this campaign, the Department for Education have published a behaviour change model developed with stakeholders from across the sector drawing on the latest research and evidence and the experience of what works on the ground. This sets out the simple, everyday activities that parents can do with their children in the early years to promote communication, language and literacy development – summarised as 'chat, play, read'.

The campaign is part of the Department for Education's wider social mobility programme, which is backed with over £100m of investment.

DfE/Public Health England are currently leading a programme of work providing training to create speech, language and communication trainers from the health visiting workforce across England. The ambition is to spread this training in local areas to the wider early years workforce through both the new health visitor trainers and local speech and language therapy teams. The training has two key aims:

1. To increase knowledge of:
 - » typical /non-typical speech, language and communication development in all children

- » the impact of speech, language and communication needs on long-term health and wellbeing outcomes for children
- » the application of evidence-based strategies to promote speech, language and communication development with all children and families.

2. To increase confidence and ensure those receiving the training:

- » identify risk factors for SLCN through assessments
- » use evidence-based strategies to support families when a SLCN is identified and consider methods to demonstrate impact of the interventions
- » identify SLCN appropriate for referral to speech and language therapy and /or evidenced-based support through local pathways.

The training will encourage working in partnership with parents and other service providers to ensure there are a variety of approaches to support children and families including:

- » Delivering the key messages of Chat, Play, Read
- » Using daily routines and everyday interactions as the context for modelling language

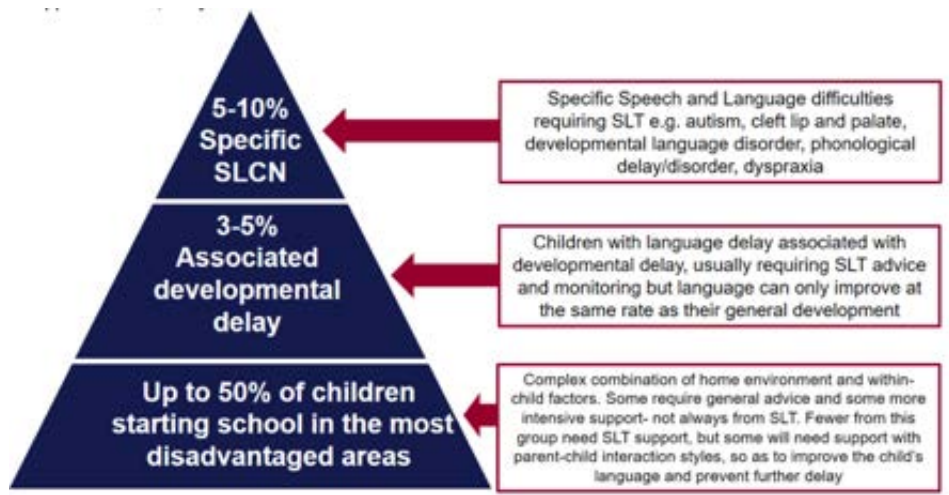


Figure 1: Law et al, 2017

- » Small group targeted interventions.

The training is one strand of the work PHE is leading. Other elements include:

- » A Speech, Language and Communication Pathway for Children under five years old and guidance to support local commissioners and service leads. This guidance will support local areas to develop integrated SLC pathways for use by professionals and parents/carers as well as support to develop a confident and skilled workforce. The guidance will be available in 2020.
- » An early language assessment tool, which is currently being developed and evaluated. The tool is being piloted in five local authorities across the

country and the evaluation will be completed by spring 2020.

Speech, language and communication is everyone's business and effective approaches require strong partnership working locally. Parents are crucial as the experts in their child's development, they can be supported to ensure their child has the best start in life and any SLCN are identified early. Those working with families are in an ideal position to support parents to improve child development, whilst assessing the needs of the child at the earliest opportunity to ensure children are: "Ready to learn at 2 and Ready for school at 5".

References

1. Department for Education (2017) **Social Mobility Action Plan for Education, Reducing the Word Gap**. Available at: <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-social-mobility-through-education>>
2. Law, J., Charlton, K., Asmussen, K. (2017) **Language as a child well-being indicator**. Available at: <<https://www.eif.org.uk/report/language-as-a-child-wellbeing-indicator>>
3. ICAN and Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists. (2018) **Bercow: Ten Years On**. Available at: <www.bercow10yearson.com>

Making Communication Everyone's Business

Nottinghamshire share their Language for Life strategy to improve speech, language and communication outcomes.

Developing strong speech, language and communication skills in the early years is crucial for children's long-term development and wellbeing. Communication and language skills help children make friends, learn, manage their emotions and express themselves. Communication is a crucial life skill that is learnt through everyday interactions and activities. This means supporting children's communication development is everyone's business!

Nottinghamshire's [Language for Life strategy](#) is a collaborative multi-agency early years approach to supporting all children's speech, language and communication (SLC) development which has run successfully for nearly ten years. The Language for Life strategy began in 2010 and was formally launched in 2011 at a conference as part of the National Year of Communication. It built upon innovative ways of working developed as part of the national Sure Start programme, and it sustained and embedded learning from the Every Child A Talker programme. The strategy is included in the current Early Intervention Foundation [best practice guidance](#) on how to provide

system-wide support for children's SLC. The Language for Life vision is that:

- » all children reach their communication potential by experiencing the best speech, language and communication environments possible
- » we support all communities, parents, carers and practitioners to enable them to identify and support children with early signs of speech, language and communication needs (SLCNs)
- » we provide an evidence-based graded response to early signs of SLCN.

In Nottinghamshire, there is a network of 18 clusters of children's centres delivered by Nottinghamshire Children and Families Partnership (a consortium led by Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust with Family Action and the RNN Group), and funded by Nottinghamshire County Council.

Together the county has:

- » established a multi-agency Language for Life steering group. We have bench-marked our progress against the Early Intervention Foundation's SLCN Maturity Matrix.
- » developed key speech, language and communication leadership roles including:

- Children's Centre Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs) based in every centre. SLTs work with children's centre practitioners to support high quality delivery of universal services and targeted groups for children with identified SLCNs. SLTs also work directly with children with SLCNs who are not brought to CCG-commissioned specialist SLT services.

- Highly trained Home Talk® workers who, with supervision and support from an SLT, deliver a home visiting service to support two-year-olds at risk of language difficulties.

- Encouraged every early years setting to appoint a Language Lead, a champion in the setting for promoting all children's SLC development. Language Leads take part in termly professional development networks and are supported by SLTs to develop the quality of practice in their setting. The aim is for all Language Leads to achieve a Level 3 award and a Nottinghamshire accreditation. More than 200 Language Leads are now part of local professional development networks.

- » Developed comprehensive training packages - mapped onto the [Speech, Language](#)



Reading baskets as part of the Nottinghamshire Language for Life strategy

[and Communication Framework](#) - for the early years workforce, including health visitors and early years practitioners.

- » Developed tracking and early identification tools for health visitors and early years settings. The introduction of a locally-devised two year language assessment tool for the health visiting team increased appropriate early referral to language support services.
- » Developed targeted programmes including Home Talk® (a home visiting service) and Little Talkers (family learning groups in children's centres) to support children at risk of long term SLCNs.
- » Developed public health

resources and social media to increase the awareness, knowledge and skills of parents, carers and practitioners around SLC.

- » Developed a system to identify and provide support for children who are not brought to community SLT services.
- » Embedded a culture of evaluation, research and service improvement.

Evidence of Impact

A research study showed that completion of our Home Talk® service was associated with accelerated age-adjusted language development for two-year-olds at risk of long term SLCNs because of delayed expressive language skills. Additionally, it led to early identification

of previously undetected wider SLCNs for some children who were in need of specialist SLT support. Parents really value the service:

"He grew in confidence and so did I (being a single parent I lacked this). The Home Talk worker helped me feel this way and that's something I'll never forget."

"He is now able to tell us what he wants and express himself which has made us all happy together and a lot less frustrated"

The SLT training course for early years educators **Let's Interact: An adaptation of Learning Language and Loving It™ - The Hanen Program® for Early**

(continued on p22)

Childhood Educators/ Teachers leads to significant changes in practitioners' use of communication-facilitating strategies. The course is now included on the Communication Trust [What Works](#) database.

The Nottinghamshire Children and Families Partnership SLT team's Year of Evaluation report showcased the full team's involvement in service improvement, evaluation and research. It is cited as best practice in the [Bercow 10 Years On](#) national review of provision for children's SLC.

In 2018, Nottinghamshire's performance in Communication and Language as measured by the Foundation Stage Profile (FSP) was slightly above the national average.

Key Learning Points

We have learnt a great deal over many years working on this agenda. Our experiences

may help you work together in your local area on the vital and complex job of supporting children's SLC development.

We have found that:

- » A local authority-wide integrated multi-agency Speech, Language and Communication steering group is vital. Communication needs to be everyone's business!
- » Children's centres are ideally placed to support this agenda. SLTs based in Children's Centres can effectively support universal and targeted services, as well as providing specialist SLT for the most vulnerable children and families.
- » Children with SLCNs should be identified as a vulnerable group by local authorities and commissioners.
- » Due to the complex nature of SLCNs, retention of SLT strategic and operational leadership locally is crucial.
- » It is crucial to build upon past work, steering away from a "project mentality".
- » To achieve a graded response to signs of

SLCN, low cost workforce development and key language leadership roles across the workforce are needed. It is important that staff in universal and targeted services have knowledge and skills in identifying SLCN, providing the best advice to parents and carers, supporting all children's needs, and knowing when to refer on for SLT. Having local Children's Centre SLTs providing this training, support and supervision builds the close working relationships needed to facilitate this.

- » A safety net system is required for children who are not brought to SLT appointments. These children often need an integrated support package so as to tackle the many challenges their families face which are impacting on their language development.

To find out more about us, please visit

<https://www.nottinghamshirehealthcare.nhs.uk/language-for-life>

www.facebook.com/nottslanguageforlife



Dave McDonald and Jane Young job share the Speech and Language Therapy Service Manager post for Nottinghamshire Children and Families Partnership, which is part of Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust. They both have a background in early years speech, language and communication development and have developed expertise in prevention and early identification of speech, language and communication needs. They have a particular interest in ensuring that all children experience the best quality interactions in their everyday lives so they are able to reach their language potential and thus have a platform to build their future learning and development. They believe that services should be made as accessible as possible and that working collaboratively with parents and professionals is the best way to improve the quality of the language environments that all children experience. They believe passionately that innovation and evaluation should be at the heart of services and have embedded this successfully within their team.

Children's Centre Leader

Thank you for reading this issue of Children's Centre Leader. Remember to pass your issue on.

If you didn't receive this issue directly from us:

[add your name to the subscription list](#).

Let us know your thoughts on topics raised here by tweeting [@hempalls](#) or commenting on Facebook.

All of the articles are available to read individually [online on Medium](#).

Email article ideas to cclr@hempalls.com

We look forward to working with you.

Cover photo by Katie Moum on Unsplash

Children's Centre Leader Registered Charity Number: 1167972

Editorial team:

Managing Editor: James Hempall, OBE

Editor: Mel Parks

Contact us at
cclr@hempalls.com

Find us on
www.chcentreleader.com

Follow on
Twitter for news
and updates
and join the
Facebook group

